He Said/ She Said: Dancers and Choreographers Talk about the Role of Gender in their Lives and Work

Dance Magazine / Nov 01, 2005

Interviewed by Joseph Carman, Steven Sucato,Â and Wendy Perron.

Growing up in Korea, being a male dancer was looked down upon. For six years, my mother kept the fact that I was taking dance classes a secret from my father, because of traditional views Koreans have on gender roles and that men don't dance. In my public school I was the only male who danced and I lost a lot of friends because of it. Even when I went to college, I was the only male dancer in a class of 39. I think in the past 15 years that has changed, and Koreans have become more open and accepting of males pursuing a career as a dancer. My father is now even proud of my dancing. —Jae Man Joo, dancer, Complexions Dance Company, NY

A woman-centered space is where the women are in power, artistically and collaboratively. In the women's consciousness-raising sessions of the '70s you could express your feelings in a safe way. Now we call it dialogic learning, dialogic process. It's about asking questions and valuing everyone's voice at the table. When I first did Hands Singing Song, the section where it's about handshakes, high fives…it was all women. Then later I said, "This is really about male energy." When I reset it on Philadanco, I made that section all male. Within the African American male culture, there is a competitive, bragging culture, which I love. We kind of took that over in Batty Moves with the raps that we do: "I'm the best," "No I'm the best, and this is why."

When men come into a dance department, often it's with scholarships, and I think women get the idea that we're a dime a dozen and that our voice has less power. I try to say to the young women, "I bet you have something to say." That's why we did this project Next Generation, which is to nurture female choreographic voices.—Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, artistic director, Urban Bush Women; faculty, Florida State University.

I was a classic little boy who went to see my sister in a dance recital. She was the featured soloist in a ballet—all the other girls were fireflies, but she was the Glow Fairy. At a certain point, she reached under her tutu and switched on the battery pack, and all the lights in the theater went out and she twinkled. I looked at her and thought, "Well, that's what I want to do with the rest of my life." It never occurred to me it was something I couldn't do or wasn't allowed to do. I didn't know I was going to have to fight for it.

When I choreographed 29 Effeminate Gestures, the gestures led me to understand that there

was this effeminate side of myself that I had chopped off, covered up, and retrained. I wanted to reclaim it as my essential self.

Dancers are tactile. We're in a profession where men are allowed to touch men and men are allowed to touch women, and all other configurations. All those things are disobedient to the dominant culture. We are deviant people as a profession. We've created a kind of tribal culture. That's a great gift. —Joe Goode, artistic director, Joe Goode Performance Group, San Francisco

Women are still mostly expected to be thin or small, graceful, delicate, ephemeral, light, silent, and gentle. All of these qualities keep us safely within our gender roles. The reason I chose acrobatics as my company's method of physical training, instead of dance training, was that it emphasizes power, strength, connection, and what you can do with your body as opposed to what your body looks like.

Something that concerns me, even in some of my favorite modern dance companies like Merce Cunningham and Mark Morris' recent choreography, is that when there is partnering or lifting, 99 percent of the time the men are lifting the women. And half the time the men aren't even bigger than the women! Particularly when a choreographer questions so many of the conventions of movement, to not examine the roles of who lifts whom is short-sighted. It does seem really late in the history of the women's movement for muscularity and strength to be things that we're finally comfortable with. —Sarah East Johnson, artistic director, LAVA, NYC

I always felt comfortable being wild, but most women don't. When I was in training, the men were allowed to dance more freely—just get off the ground and leap and who cares where your arms are. The boys were prized and nurtured, but the women felt like they were never good enough.

In the early '90s I went to Eastern Europe to expose ballet students to modern dance. One of the teachers at a Russian-style school told me how they accept pupils at an early age. They scrutinize and measure every part of the girls' bodies. But about the boys, she said, "They have two feet, two hands? We take."

Later I started circulating with writers and poets, and boy, did I feel how women were treated differently than men! If you show up as a woman, you're first and foremost a sexual partner, not a creative mind. In modern dance, women have been the pioneers and innovators, so you are an artist and treated as such. I realized how unusual and lucky I was to have grown up in the modern dance world. —Stephanie Skura, choreographer/teacher, Seattle

Men tend to walk down the street in a straight line, and women move out of the way. Men sit on the subway with their legs wide apart, and women are all crunched.

When I made S/He in 1995, I had all my women dancers go to Diane Torr's drag king workshop. I challenged them to try a transgender use of posture and space. This workshopÂ shocked me at first because females are raised to be accommodating. I tried to take into my body that whole male use of space and weight. It's like being at the zoo: Who are these creatures? We had to study like mad.

When I teach class now, we do a segment on gender shifts that focuses on heads, eyes, the torque—how women nod and smile and men command stillness. It freaked out the women to not move in that accommodating way.

As I tour and teach workshops and sit in on classes, I see that men are more aggressive about asking questions and moving into space. I don't know if women hold back or if men feel more comfortable. I think that's cultural training. —Jane Comfort, choreographer, NYC

Male and female, yin and yang, are in a constant cycling between one another. In my opinion it is not as strong a dichotomy as we might think. My works are affected by, and sometimes reflect, male traits within me. When you are creating dances about life and being human, inevitably issues of gender come into play. —Lani Fand Weissbach, artistic director, Shen & Bones Performance Group, Pennsylvania

There is a perception that men have this proclivity to shine when it comes to breakdancing, and the women doing it are just scraping by. So when people hire breakdancers, they most often are looking for males. I went to an audition not long ago for a denim commercial that was looking for breakdancers. I made it to the final round of cuts but wasn't chosen; my husband was. My husband went to bat for me to try and get me a part in the commercial, citing that a female breaker in the spot would make it more cutting edge. In the end, I was hired to be in the commercial but in the background as a cheerleader for my husband. —Ana "Rokafella" Garcia, hip hop dancer, artistic director, Full Circle Productions, Bronx, NY

I am a heterosexual woman and often my work reflects relationships between men and women. In the past three years, however, I have given birth to two children, and that has had a huge effect on my work. In a very female sense, the role of mother and nurturer has influenced my recent works. I have also noticed, being a female choreographer in the ballet world, that my gender has actually helped me get work, and that often ballet companies market me because of my gender as a sort of novelty in the field. —Julia Adam, choreographer, San Francisco

I remember that a woman once came backstage when I was touring and told me, "You are a beautiful man and you are a beautiful woman." I was playing both genders in that particular production. I have always been interested in connecting masculine and feminine. From ages 7 to 17, I acted, danced, and sang as a member of Toronto Children's Players. I played men, women, young, old, animal, and spirit. What I realize looking back on those days is that if you are a free spirit, you can be everything.Â —Jamie Cunningham,co-director, From the Horse's Mouth, NYC

Gender issues came to me rather than me going to gender issues. I have an all-male dance company and that seems to be the focus of press surrounding the company. But I don't think choreographically that is where I start—it is just part of the equation. In the partnering work I am interested in using only male dancers as a way of solving technical problems rather than a conscious decision about gender. Nowadays in the contemporary dance scene there is much more equality in dance roles. Women lifting men onstage is no longer a big deal; it is accepted and very often goes on unnoticed. —Terry Creach, artistic director,

Creach/Company; faculty, Bennington College, Vermont

One of the main reasons we started the Trocks [in 1974] was because women in ballet had all the fun roles and there was no repertoire that put men first. So we co-opted the women's roles, making light of them and parodying women's dominance in ballet. The dance world has certainly changed since we started the company and men have now come to the forefront. In the last 10 years, contemporary ballet has become less gender specific and there is an emphasis on leveling the playing field. A level playing field is boring. The school of thought that men and woman should be the same in dance is patently idiotic. They are different, and probably will always be different and it is much more interesting that way. —Peter Anastos, original member/founder, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, NYCÂ

Our culture wants to protect female bodies in a different way than it protects male bodies. I think a lot of it has to do with our generative organs. They think, "Treat her like a holy vessel because she might be having babies."

The language around giving birth is culled from the male idiom. I really don't believe that if men were having babies they would call it something as passive as "having babies." They would say, "We're making people." Adjectives attached to my work over the years have been "violent," "masochistic," "sadistic." And yet the very same actions coming from a guy, would be called "rambunctious."

I don't think of my work in a gender-based way. My body can take it; the women in my company can take it. Those transgressive acts are what the work's about. I get comments from young girls across the world that send a clear message, "Listen, there's nothing you can't do." I hope there's a plate shift in terms of how people look at the gender issue.Â — Elizabeth Streb, artistic director, STREB director, STREB, Brooklyn, NY

I'm a very pansexual person. My take on sexuality is to make it as bare and confusing as it is. Putting on a corset—I knew it was an iconic female gesture, but I never thought of myself in drag. I just thought, "This is who I am and I'm putting this on."

When I came into the postmodern dance world, everyone had the same roles and wore the same clothes. If you talked about sex or intent, you were screwed. Stripping in vaudeville is supposed to be low art, so any sexual content associates you with the devil's work, looking at it in Christian terms. Dancers get very uncomfortable, because they think they're being their best self onstage, so if you ask a dancer to do something sexually explicit, they freak out, because that's not what they do.

At one point all you saw onstage was men lifting or choking women. That's how I was introduced to partnering. A man was either chasing a woman around and idealizing her, or raping and choking her. I find that incredibly offensive. —Stephen Petronio, artistic director, Stephen Petronio Company, NYC

Sometimes you put two men together, and it becomes a discussion about two men. It's the same with two women, or a man and woman. I want to put a man and woman together because of their qualities, not because they're men and women.Â

Men are very feminized in my work. That has something to do with the world view—there is an imbalance of maleness. One of the things that's astounding to me now is this male-against-male bashing of heads ruining the world. I want to make dances that undermine that as a construct. For me, the men and the women are all women. I definitely relate to women. I feel like a woman. —Tere O'Connor, artistic director, Tere O'Connor Dance, NYC

When I first started, my hero was Nureyev. I had no idea that he was homosexual, but boy did I love the way he presented himself as a male figure! One of the things I love about classical ballet is the difference between the two genders.

I'd say that the boys come to class with more confidence. Some of the guys will just come in and plop themselves around. When you are one of the few, you get a little extra praise from the teachers.

In the history of American dance, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and Ted Shawn's Men Dancers promoted such a virile image of male dancing that I'm surprised it hasn't rubbed off on society's perception of dance. The reason I started so late is that I had the same preconceived notions as other boys. That's part of the society we grew up in. Maybe those of us who are teaching are not doing a good enough job educating people. —Charles Flachs, faculty, Mt. Holyoke College; co-director, Massachusetts Academy of Ballet

I think the genesis of my vocabulary is sex-free. The bodies, personalities, and spirits of the people I work with influence the choreography more than gender. But in aerial work, which I've done in a number of pieces, the actual pounds in the air affect the quality. In Hans Christian Andersen, the mermaids are unbelievably beautiful, and a male would not have had that lightness of line.

When Alison Chase and I joined Pilobolus in 1971 (when there were just three men), we shaped ourselves to fit, which meant moving athletically and strongly. I carried men, and slipped a disc carrying a man. Eventually, our bodies and the female line gave another color to their movement. We brought in our own sense of theatricality and training—we had ballet—which changed the look of the company. We had a finish, they were cruder, and the combination has become the signature of Pilobolus. —Martha Clarke, choreographer/director, NYC

In the earliest days when certain things needed to be said in public that are now old hat, like queerness and feminism, I wouldn't choreograph anything that couldn't be done equally well by men or women. If I want a big number with everybody in it, you don't get to decide which sex you get to be, you just get to be in the dance.

On the other hand, L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato (1998) has big sections for men's and women's dances. That seems like what the text asks for. It's about men, and women, and men and women together. I like that. Just because I'm queer doesn't mean I expect everyone else to be.

And I want to go on record saying I use the word gender for grammar and sex for people. —

Mark Morris, artistic director, Mark Morris Dance Group, Brooklyn, NY

Women have been documentarians in tap: Jane Goldberg, Constance Valis Hill, Rusty Frank, Brenda Bufalino, Cheryl Willis, Jacqui Malone, and I'll add myself to that list with the Philadelphia Folklore Project.

LaVaughn Robinson, my mentor and dance partner, talks about his being inspired by a woman tap dancer, Louise Madison, and the way she sparked his imagination for what presence and professionalism were for a tap dancer. I thought it significant that a stellar tap artist in this very male-dominated genre considered a woman an iconic figure.

Women have made possible diverse styles and approaches in tap—to tap gently and slowly, or methodically and narratively—when the style was lightning fast feet and hard-hitting rhythm. By breaking with the convention, women have influenced men to also dance slowly and narratively. There have been battles as to whether women have been second best in technical prowess, and that drove women to want to dance as hard and fast as the men. There are women who can match the men tap for tap. So the issue is whether there is room for different approaches to artistic expression. I was struck in May when, at Tap Extravaganza in New York, Charon Aldredge, a technically powerful dancer, came out and danced in a dress and high heels to a ballad. It was heartening to view, and the audience response to it was wonderful. —Germaine Ingram, tap dancer, Philadelphia, PA

When I moved to New York, it seemed like an interesting coincidence that a lot of the women whose work I was drawn to were also lesbians—Jennifer Monson, Sarah East Johnson. Lesbians and feminists tend to have a charged use of space and an awareness about the male gaze that you can subvert on occasion. Jennifer Monson did a piece two years ago where she was swinging a ladder around. The audience was afraid that she would lose control and the ladder would fly out and hit them. It's like she was saying, "I'm not a passive object to be viewed—better watch out or I'll hit you." It came across as very feminist and risky.

One of the first opportunities I had to perform my work was Dixon Place in their "HOT!" Festival, which is a month-long series of queer programming. I also do a lot of self production at the WOW Café Theater, which is a women's collective that's open to all women and transgendered people but it's been historically a lesbian majority. It gave me an opportunity to do my own evening-length show as a very young choreographer.Â —Anne Gadwa, choreographer, NYC

In my performance pieces, I'm interested in playing with stereotypes of masculinity, putting them under duress, and watching them fall apart. I'm straight, and I realize that my gender is constructed in a very mainstream way. I do battle with that in myself. My recent piece Shlammer takes to task male violence, male in-chargeness. I wanted to make more space for what it means to be a straight man. It's not just gay men who are allowed to be emotional or demonstrative.

I've always been more comfortable in the company of gay men than straight men. It seems easier to communicate on an emotional level with gay men. I have an ongoing collaboration with David Dorfman, but he's unusual in that way, too. There are sections of our duets where

we try to be as undefended as possible. We wanted to stretch ourselves and our way of thinking about two straight men in a room together. —Dan Froot, performer/writer/choreographer, Los Angeles

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Dance Magazine / May 03, 2021

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Topical Pain Relievers Are the Next Item on Your Dancer Self-Care Supply List

With the stressors of the pandemic still lingering more than one year later, self-care is, rightfully, a priority for everyone right now. But dancers have always known the

importance of keeping their bodies and minds as healthy as possible. After all, your body is your instrument, and as we make our long-awaited returns to the studio and stage, finding self-care strategies that work for you will be crucial to getting back up to speed—mentally and physically—with your rigorous performing and training schedule.

Dancers have a myriad of options to choose from when it comes to treating minor ailments like soreness, swelling and bruising. One that's quickly gaining popularity are topical pain relievers, which provide targeted, temporary relief of minor pain. These days, there's more than just your tried-and-true Tiger Balm on the shelves. From CBD lotions to warming gels and patches, finding the product that's right for you can be as difficult as finding the perfect Rockette-red shade of lipstick…but even more beneficial to your dance career.

Read on for our breakdown of some of the most common ingredients to look out for in the topical pain relief aisle.

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RECEPTRA NATURALS

Friday Film Break: Rashaun Mitchell, Silas Riener and Patti Smith Celebrate Gerhard Richter

Rashaun Mitchell + Silas Riener perform in Gagosian gallery's latest episode of Gagosian Premieres. Available on Gagosian's website and YouTube channel, the short film celebrates the work of abstract expressionist painter Gerhard Richter.

Gagosian is one of the foremost art galleries in the world, with 17 branches spanning the United States, Europe and Asia.

Mitchell and Riener, along with erudite punk rock goddess Patti Smith, go into stirring dialogue with Richter's mesmeric, larger than life works through spoken word, commentary, song, and of course, contemporary movement.

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FRIDAY FILM BREAK